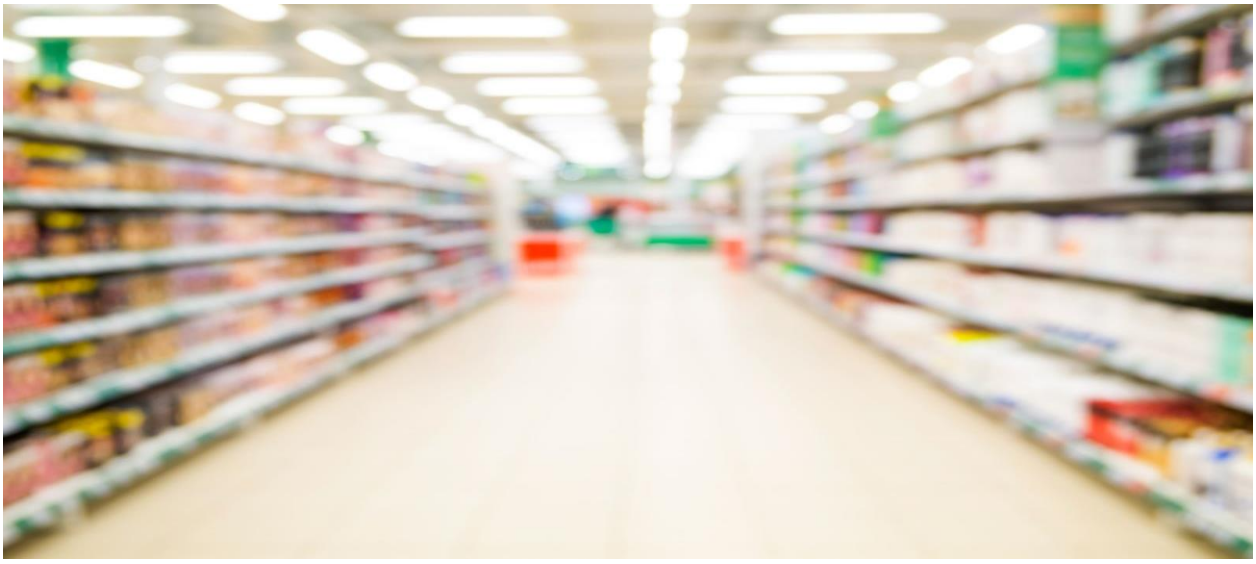
Why Do We Need Single-Use Plastics?



Many packaging materials are only used once before being recycled or sent to landfill. However, plastic, rather than other materials, is typically attached to the term ‘single use’ in the media. In an ideal world, plastic would not be thought of in this way because it would always be recycled into another product, reducing our dependence upon virgin material.

78% of plastic packaging is recovered in the UK, 46% is recycled and the UK is ranked 7th in Europe. All plastics can be recycled but there are currently technical barriers to recycling some types of them on an industrial scale, although work is being done around the world to overcome these.

Why do we need single-use plastic in the first place?

- When food or other products are packaged in plastic, they are protected and in the case of fresh goods, they remain fresher for longer.
- Keeping food from spoiling reduces food waste, which helps reduce the strain in the planet’s resources and keeps costs down. This is partly why pre-packaged goods are often cheaper than loose goods.

- Because plastic packaging is so good at protecting and preserving fresh goods, it means we are able to eat a wide variety of fresh foods year-round rather than seasonally, expanding the range of foods we can enjoy.
- Plastic packaging is extremely hygienic, keeping food and other products insulated against any air-borne germs. It also prevents germs from being spread by people handling goods intended for consumption.
- It is an extremely versatile material that in many cases is resealable and helps present goods in convenient sizes, bundles or portions.
- As well as presenting the product in an attractive way, it helps convey key information such as use-by dates, allergen information and recycling information.
- It should also be remembered that single-use plastic such as blood bags and syringes helps modern healthcare remain affordable for all and helps provide a safe and hygienic environment in hospitals.
- Stringent regulations are in place to protect consumers of all ages.

What about single-use plastics that cannot currently be recycled?

- Where you live influences the range of materials that can be recycled because there are 39 different sets of rules across the UK, something the plastics industry and recycling industry would like simplified.
- Most rigid plastic packaging can be recycled right across the UK and recycling rates have been improving for over 20 years.
- Flexible packaging formats are less commonly recycled, although the technology exists to do so.
- If you consider the overall environmental impact of the products packaging protects — which includes energy use, water use, land use and CO2 emissions — there remains a case for using resource efficient single-use plastics, even in a more difficult-to-recycle format.
- In these cases, the energy should be recovered via an Energy From Waste facility until developments in technology allow for them to be recycled at scale.
- Plastic remains the most resource efficient material in these cases — more than alternatives — as it typically uses less water, land and energy to manufacture and keeps CO2 emissions down during during transportation because it is very lightweight..

Based on the evidence, the BPF believes…

There remains a case for single-use packaging as it reduces food waste and cost, minimises the risk of contamination and increases the range of products we are able to buy.

- It is sensible to package goods early in the supply chain to keep them fresh and protected for as long as possible.
- Food that benefits from plastic packaging will ultimately last longer on its journey from farm to fridge, keeping costs down because less food spoils.
- Plastic packaging typically uses far less resources than the products it protects. For example, a 330g steak generates 7.5kg of CO2 on its journey from farm to fridge; the plastic tray protecting it increases shelf life notably and is responsible for just 80g.
- Moving away from single-use packaging may mean food and other products are more likely to be exposed to germs either through the air or by being handled.
- Technologies currently exist that mean every type of plastic can be recycled. Work is being done around the world to scale this technology up so that it can serve communities on an industrial scale.
- Producers of plastic packaging contribute to society's recycling and waste management costs via their EPR obligations. During 2019 these are being reviewed and updated.
- Single-use plastics will continue to have a role to play in modern society and everyone has a role to play in ensuring as much material is recaptured for recycling as possible.

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